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Problematic Weather Likely Affects Crop Production

Report Categories:

Grain and Feed

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Report Highlights:

BM0017. Unusual high temperatures and monsoon rains are affecting Burma's agricultural sector. The report highlights a rundown of climatic conditions for the first half of 2010, production problems encountered, the Government of Burma's (GOB) response, and the probable impact on crop production and social welfare for MY 2010/11.

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El Niño Phenomenon

Although the Department of Meteorology and Hydrology predicted in early 2010 that the El Niño phenomenon would affect Burma with lack of precipitation and high temperatures, most people, including farmers, were unaware of it until March as the precipitation and temperature effects were being felt throughout the country. In late March, water tables were at their lowest as wells dried up and a significant drop in the water levels of Taunggyi and Inlay Lake in the Southern Shan States. In April, daily temperatures topped at 38 Celsius for most of the month with an average of 30 Celsius. In the first week of May, the GOB officially announced that water shortages occurred in Magwe, Monywa, Bago, Taninthayi, Irrawaddy and Yangon Divisions and in some townships of Shan State (South). Facing these shortages that also affected water supplies for human consumption, local authorities and a few relevant government agencies managed to provide drinking water and portable water in affected townships and divisions.

The Lila Cyclone brought a few rainfalls in the second week of May. Farmers reacted by preparing their land for cultivation and wet bed nurseries for paddy seedlings. Some farmers opted to broadcast seeds with dry broadcasting technique. Unfortunately, the rains were not sufficient for seeds to sprout, the fields became barren, and farmers who carried out early plantings faced widespread losses.

The first Monsoon rains began in the second week of May, which were one to two weeks later than usual. Bi Weekly Eleven newspaper quoted an interview with an official from Department of Meteorology and Hydrology in May in that this may be the first time in forty years that Burma does not have April rain showers and experienced long severe heat and dry conditions all over the country in the first half of the year.

Farmers began seeding paddy in their land, and as a result the paddy harvest for MY 2010/11 is expected to start in early October, one month later than usual. By the end of May, accumulated growing area of main season crop was 2 percent of the 6.88 million hectares that the GOB has targeted as a goal. The Myanmar Meteorology and Hydrology Department recently reported that monsoon rains could be interrupted in July and August.

In addition, an official in the Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS), an agency under the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MAI), recently expressed his concern in the bi-weekly Eleven News about a likelihood end of the rainy season in September instead of October. He also mentioned that while both delayed rain and fewer rainy days would undoubtedly affect Burma's overall paddy production, but it would also impact bean and pulse production as the remaining moisture in the soil after the paddy harvest might be short for their proper production. To counter this, the official recommended that farmers prepare the land properly and use short and intermediate paddy varieties of 120-135 days, instead of the long maturity varieties that take over 150 days to harvest.

Government Response: No Specific Action Plan

The GOB has yet to impose any specific measures to deal with any possible eventualities brought upon this unusual weather phenomenon. However, the MAI has taken the lead in conducting outreach through the media “Guidelines for Farmers” to educate farmers on proper land preparation, water reservoir maintenance, collective seed bedding, proper seeding techniques, and use of short and intermediate varieties.

The Current Situation and Outlook

- The current weather prognosis is not good for the farmers as they are in need of rainfall for the critical panicle initiation stage for the main crop paddy. In addition, a possible lack of water supplies would affect dry season paddy production in irrigated areas. Paddy production is accordingly at risk in MY 2010/11. However, it is too early to estimate the crop size at the moment.
- Not only paddy production, agricultural production as a whole also looks bleak. Long hot spells and short raining days should lead to insufficient residual moisture left in the soil, and in turn could severely affect the cultivation of second crops like beans and pulses, sesame, and other field crops. Livelihood of the farmers on the whole will be affected if their second cash crop could not be grown.
- A likelihood of decline in paddy production and possible delayed harvest would also affect rice domestic consumption and exports. Burma could encounter a severe shortage of rice supplies to feed Burmese people and possible extremely high rice prices may lead to serious starvation among people who cannot afford rice prices. In addition, rice exports should be limited to a miniscule amount in MY 2010/11. The GOB is likely to hold the issuance of rice export licenses implemented in April until November, 2010 as they await and see how the rice production situation pans out.
- Paddy lands in Nargis Cyclone-affected areas in Irrawaddy Division have encountered problems of salinity in the soil. Long hot spells and dry conditions made the situation even worse by increasing degree of salinity in the soil.
- Farmers are in dire need of high yielding short/medium paddy variety seeds but MAI reported that the country’s seed production capacity can meet only a quarter of total need for all varieties of paddy. At the moment, 25 seed improvement farms are producing 3,080 MT of registered seed annually and releasing to farmers for contract production of certified seeds. Certified seeds typically can be used for three years. Due to a lack of certified seed supplies, most farmers secure their seeds from their own paddy harvest or from local traders. Although loans provided by Agricultural Development Companies may help farmers to buy certified seeds, the loan amounts are not sufficient to cover all expenses. In addition, the loan scheme through ADCs covers a small fraction of farmer population.